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WASHINGTON TIMES  
13 February 1986

# Ex-Salvadoran officer says killing raged in early '80s

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A former Salvadoran army officer says he participated in death squad killings in the early 1980s and witnessed the slaughter of civilians by El Salvador's military.

Former Lt. Ricardo Ernesto Castro, who plans to seek political asylum in the United States, said the Salvadoran army routinely killed suspected "subversives" in early 1981. He said he personally commanded four assassination missions, claiming about a dozen lives.

Mr. Castro, who left El Salvador in mid-1982, is the first Salvadoran army officer to publicly state that he participated in death-squad killings, though this was a period when human-rights abuses in the Central American nation were known to be

widespread. He initially told his story to free-lance reporter Allan Nairn for an article in the current issue of *Progressive*, a left-of-center monthly magazine. There was no explanation of why he had not come forward with his story until now.

Mr. Castro, 35, a 1973 West Point graduate, said he also saw the army execute unarmed women and children during a counterinsurgency sweep near the Rio Lempa in the fall of 1981 and leave the bodies in shallow streams as a warning to leftist guerrillas.

"My company was thirsty, but the soldiers would not take water from one of these streams because of these kids' corpses," Mr. Castro said in an interview at his suburban Washington home.

Mr. Castro, however, said in the interview he was recruited to work with the CIA and served as a translator for an American who trained the Salvadoran military on interrogation techniques. He said the American trainer did not advocate torture but suggested that suspects be kept disoriented through isolation and other psychological tactics.

Mr. Castro's statements support allegations made by human rights groups that the Salvadoran military committed massive abuses in the early 1980s, killing tens of thousands of civilians. During those years, the Reagan administration noted that abuses were occurring but disputed some of the specific charges brought against the government.

In a July 1982 report certifying human rights progress in El Salvador, the State Department said, "There has been no evidence to support periodic guerrilla allegations of large-scale massacres allegedly committed by government forces."

The administration says abuses have largely been brought under control, and human-rights groups say government forces still commit selective murders in the cities and use firepower indiscriminately in the countryside.

An estimated 50,000 civilians have died in the 6-year-old civil war.

Mr. Castro said he came to the United States in mid-1982 to tell U.S. officials about the corruption and atrocities, which many young officers felt were undermining pros-

pects for restoring peace in El Salvador. After his appeals received little attention, he said he decided to stay with his wife and three children. He plans to request political asylum.

Mr. Castro said the military high command initially used army personnel to carry out the assassinations. But by mid-1981, the killings were being carried out by the government security forces.

"All the killings I know of were done by the armed forces," Mr. Castro said. "It was one of these deals when you come back from a mission, the colonel calls you over and says, 'Lieutenant, you're going out on a mission. You're going to get dressed up as a civilian and you're going to go out and this individual will show you the way.'"



Former Lt. Ricardo Ernesto Castro